



THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA
National Catholic School of Social Service
Washington, DC 20064

SSS 581 - Online

***Individual Final Paper -- Analysis of Contemporary Social Issue**

Purpose and Description

The purpose of this assignment is to assess your understanding of Kingdon's agenda-setting model, i.e., the factors that contribute to a social policy issue coming to the attention of policy makers and getting on the agenda for legislative action.

Kingdon (1995) and Jansson (2008) state that social issues only get on the *public policy agenda* when three agenda-setting streams converge:

1. The **problem stream**: Policy makers recognize that a social issue has become a problem that needs legislative attention. Kingdon identifies several ways in which policy makers determine that a social issue is a problem that needs attention. They are: *systematic indicators* (census data, GAO reports, statistical trends); *focusing events* (disaster, crisis, personal experience of policy maker); and significant (voluminous) *feedback* from constituents or other sources as three ways in which problems come to the attention of decision-makers. (The media is typically a critical actor in all three streams, but in particular the problem stream.)
2. The **politics stream**: What are the viewpoints and predispositions of the various political actors engaged in putting an issue on a legislative agenda? Jansson (p. 194) identifies a series of political actors to consider in the politics stream, including heads of government (Executive and agenda Directors); legislators; key members of government bureaucracy; lobbyists; public (through polls); etc.
3. The **policy (or solution) stream**: For every issue there are a series of suggested solutions or policy alternatives for policy-makers to consider. The goal for the social work policy practitioner is to shepherd her/his preferred policy alternative to ensure it is selected among the many options.

This paper is an analysis of a social issue, e.g., immigration, homelessness, childhood obesity, people without health insurance, and to apply Kingdon's/Jansson's agenda-setting model to analyze how the factors in the current context affect whether or not the issue gets on the political agenda and even the factors that may have led to the selection of a particular policy alternative.

Steps for Completing the Assignment

Select one of the following contemporary social issues as the topic for your paper.

- Homelessness
- Citizen privacy/Government surveillance

- Immigration
- Childhood obesity
- Gay Marriage
- Unemployment
- Lack of Health Insurance
- Racism
- Gun violence
- Death Penalty
- Ebola outbreak
- Human Trafficking

You may also select an issue that is not on the list, but you must get approval from the instructor. Ideally, the issue must be one that was under debate within the last three years. It may have a national or local issue, and should be one of particular interest to you.

3. Collect current articles and information from various news sources about this issue. For example, students can use daily issues of a newspaper, such as The Washington Post, The Washington Times, the New York Times, local newspapers, as well as scholarly journal articles, magazines, television and radio programs (e.g., the Jim Lehrer News hour or National Public Radio programs). Students may also use electronic sources. In addition, interviews with public officials, community leaders, or other people might be helpful to students in gaining insight into a problem. Where appropriate, students should also draw from course lectures, discussions, and readings. The nature of this paper (critical analysis of social issue in current context) makes sources from the mass media (newspapers, news magazines, thoughtful television and radio programming) of particular relevance as source material. However, scholarly journal articles may be an important resource in terms of describing the historical development of a problem or in making policy recommendations. All information collected on the issue should be cited using APA in your paper.
4. Each student must interview at least one public official, community leader, or “key informant” working with the issue to gain his/her insight into the problem and the factors affecting its presence on the political agenda. Among the questions they should explore are:
 - What is your experience of this current issue? Is it worsening, getting better, staying stable? Why or why not? What do you see as its main causes and consequences?
 - Are any important policy solutions being proposed to address the issue? What are they and how would you assess their potential impact?
 - How do you envision action on this issue progressing (or regressing) over the next year?
 - Do you have any recommendations on policy solutions that could effectively address this issue? If so, what are they?
4. Submit a final paper that analyzes the data collected in terms of the political, social and economic environment. A sample framework for the paper is:

I. Issue Topic (1 paragraph): Identify the contemporary social issue that will be the focus of the paper. Explain your rationale for selecting the topic and why it is important for social work.

II. Problem Stream (3 paragraphs):

- **Statistical Evidence for Problem:** Provide the observable and measurable data that gives evidence that this issue has become a **problem** in society that needs a policy solution. Its size and scope should be established by statistical, factual data (census data, institutional statistics such as those of the U.S. Department of Education, National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Army, etc). Using this data will define the size and scope of the issue. You should also

examine trends that have affected the underlying problem such as population shifts, economic changes, or social or cultural trends. Have the numbers of people affected increased, decreased, remained stable?

- **Causes and Consequences:** Look at the research to identify the causes and consequences of the problem. Students should have at least 6 scholarly sources to support their discussion of the causes and consequences of the social problem.
- **From Private Problem to Public Problem:** What is bringing the issue to the attention of the public and/or policy decision-makers:
 - Is it some of the trends and statistics described above that made the issue hard to ignore?
 - Was there a single event that brought attention to the problem?
 - Was a policymaker personally impacted by the issue?
 - Were there loud voices that captured the public and policy makers' attention?
 - What is the role of the media in helping to bring attention to the issue?

III. **Politics Stream:**

- Who are the actors involved in the issue, e.g., policy decision-makers, think tanks, advocacy groups, individual citizens, a collective?
- What are the competing values and philosophies of policy actors involved in framing the issue and seeking action on it?
- What is happening in the current political, economic, and/or social culture that might affect the mood of the constituency impacted by the issue? For example, how are trends influencing public sentiment; are faith-based perspectives monopolizing framing of issue; is the constituency growing tired of the war or more fearful about terrorism? How is the economy doing? How are some of the trends you identified in your description of the problem stream impacting the issue politically?

IV. **Policy Stream:**

- Are there particular policy alternatives for this issue that are getting a lot of attention? What are the competing policy ideas? What factors are contributing to their prominence?
- Is there nothing happening in the policy stream, i.e., is this an issue that is at a pre-policy stage and why?
- What factors are framing the particular policy alternatives to the issue (drawing on previous two streams).
- Does NASW have a policy position on this issue? If so, what is it?

V. **Summary of Interviews:** You should synthesize and summarize the interviews they conducted with the people in the community they spoke with about this issue.

V. **Conclusion:** Based on your analysis of the issue, how do you predict the course of the issue to progress over the next year? What is the role of social work in addressing this issue?

****Papers should be completed individually and be no more than 6 double-spaced pages in APA format. Papers are due Week 7.***